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The Native American Women's
Health Education
Resource Center

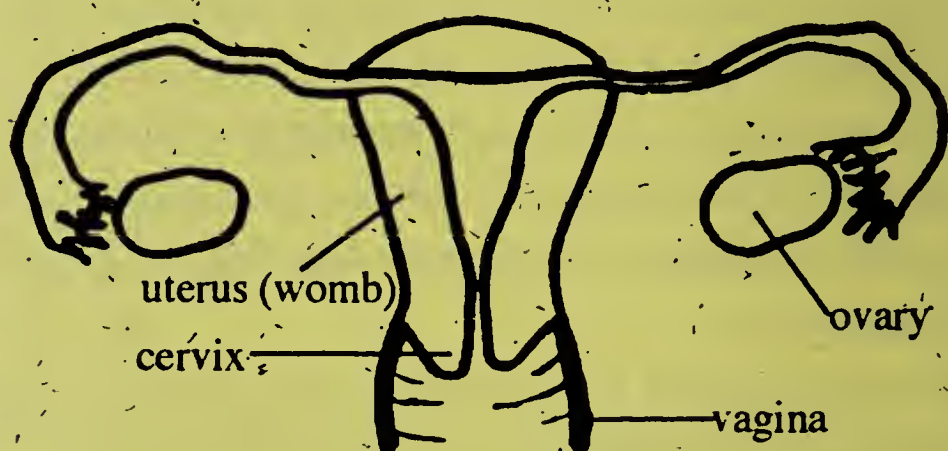
CERVICAL CANCER



What it means
and what you can do

What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is the uncontrolled growth and division of cells in the cervix, the bottom opening of the uterus (womb) that points into the vagina.



This is a slow-growing cancer and the chances of complete recovery are very good if the cancer is detected early enough with a Pap smear and treated by a doctor before it progresses further.

What is a Pap Smear?

- Pap smears are the best tool doctors have to find out whether or not your cervix is healthy. When you have a Pap smear, an instrument called a speculum is placed into your vagina so that the cervix is easy to see and reach. Then a thin brush is inserted through the speculum to your cervix so that a sample of cells can be picked up. The test only lasts a few minutes and it shouldn't hurt. A Pap smear can save your life by alerting you and your doctor to a treatable condition.



- There are a lot of reasons why a Pap smear might be abnormal. You do not necessarily have cancer. A Pap smear is sometimes unreadable because of menstrual blood or semen in the sample. The Pap can detect inflammation (swelling) and some types of infection. It can also determine whether you have fast-growing cells that are not yet cancerous.



Your feelings when you find out you have an abnormal Pap smear

You may feel scared, shocked, tired, confused, upset, or stressed when you hear you have an abnormal Pap smear. These feelings are normal. There's no need for you to panic, though. In most cases, abnormal cells do not become cancer.



If you find out you do have cancer, you might be even more worried. Remember that your condition is NOT a death sentence. Many women with cervical cancer recover completely after the cancer is treated. It might help to talk to a friend, doctor, counselor, or relative about your feelings.

Types of Pap smear results

Class O	<i>Inconclusive.</i> The lab didn't find enough cells to look at. Maybe there was menstrual blood or semen in the sample, or maybe you were on medication that affected your cervical cells.
Class I	<i>Normal healthy cells.</i> You don't need another Pap smear for a year.
Class II	<i>Atypical cells.</i> There is inflammation (swelling), an infection, or mild dysplasia (cell changes).
Class III	<i>Borderline dysplasia (cell changes) or precancerous cells.</i> Ranges from mild to severe dysplasia.
Class IV	<i>Highly suspicious for malignancy (cancer).</i> Usually in one spot.
Class V	<i>Invasive (spreading) cancer.</i>

Cervical dysplasia or cervical intraepithelial neoplasia

Cervical dysplasia or cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) means abnormal cell growth in the cervix, but it is not full-blown cancer. CIN is a spectrum of types of cervical cell growth ranging from benign (harmless) changes on one end to invasive cancer on the other. In many women with mild dysplasia, the cells will return to normal, but in others the cells will lead to cancer, so it is important to monitor the progress of your cells. Do not panic if you get a Pap result that indicates abnormal cells or CIN. Most cervical cell changes are slow and mild dysplasia can be monitored with future Pap smears or other tests.

What to do if you have an abnormal Pap smear

- Monitor your cervical cells with additional Pap smears. Have one in 3 to 6 months.
- Have your doctor check for infection in your cervix if it wasn't already checked. Get any infection(s) treated, and then repeat your Pap.
- Use condoms when you have sex. Some studies show that many women's cervical cells return to normal if they use condoms during intercourse.
- If you use birth control pills, you might want to consider switching to a barrier method like condoms or a diaphragm. Folic acid deficiency is a possible side effect of the pill. Folic acid deficiency might make your condition worse.
- Eat a healthy diet with plenty of vitamin C (found in oranges, orange juice, grapefruit, and strawberries); vitamin A (found in carrots, green leafy vegetables, and fortified milk), and folic acid (found in dried beans, fortified cereal, peanuts, and green leafy vegetables).
- Quit smoking if you can, or at least cut back on the number of cigarettes you smoke each day. Smoking can make cancer progress faster.
- If you have severe dysplasia, your doctor will recommend colposcopy. This is a 10-20 minute procedure which allows a doctor to look at your cervix using a small microscope. It shouldn't be painful but you might feel a slight pinch. The colposcopy will help you and your doctor decide the best course of action (if any is necessary).
- Don't let your doctor pressure you into getting a treatment that you don't want. Feel free to get a second opinion.
- Try to find out if there are any support groups in your area that you could join.



Risk factors for cervical cancer

No one knows exactly how or why cancer happens. There are a lot of factors that contribute to cancer. You may have one or several of the risk factors, or your own risk factor may be unknown. Some of the suspected risk factors for cervical cancer are:

- Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)
- industrial/environmental toxins (you might be exposed if you or your partner works in the mining, textile, metal, or chemical industries)
- carcinogenic sperm
- exposure to synthetic (laboratory-made) hormones like DES or birth control pills
- a partner with testicular or penile cancer
- smoking
- stress
- unhealthy housing/ living/working conditions
- unhealthy nutrition
- weakened immune system (the body is less able to fight off infection).



Some factors seem to *initiate*, or start, the process of cervical cancer (like HPV). Other factors speed up the process (like smoking and poor nutrition).

What is HPV?

- Human papilloma virus (HPV) is the virus family that causes genital warts. It is the most common sexually transmitted disease. There are 80-90 different types of HPVs but only a few are found in cancers.
- There seems to be a strong link between HPV and cervical cancer, penile cancer, and testicular cancer.
- Some women are led to believe that if they have HPV, it is their fault or their partner's fault that they develop cancer or abnormal cell changes in the cervix.
It is not your fault.
- HPV is only *one* of the suspected risk factors. Only a small number of women with risk factors will develop disease.

Native American women and cervical cancer

- At the turn of this century, cancer was rarely found in Native Americans. However, this has changed significantly. Cancer is not uncommon in Native Americans now.
- There are increasing numbers of Native American cancer survivors and these survivors are no longer silent. Native Americans have organized cancer support groups in many communities.
- Don't live with your condition silently! Talk to friends and relatives. Join or start a support group. You are not alone.

For more information:

Cancer Information Services
National Cancer Institute (NCI)
9000 Rockville Pike
Building 31, Room 10A24
Bethesda, MD 20892
1-800-4-CANCER or 1-800-422-6237

American Cancer Society (ACS)
1599 Clifton Road, NE
Atlanta, GA 30329
1-800-227-2345

National Cervical Cancer Coalition
16501 Sherman Way, Suite 110
Van Nuys, CA 91406
1-818-909-3849
www.nccc-online.org

Committee for Freedom of Choice in Cancer Therapy
141 Ellis Street, Suite 300
San Francisco, CA 94102
1-415-981-8384

National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship
1010 Wayne Avenue, Suite 505
Silver Spring, MD 20910
1-301-650-8868
<http://www.cansearch.org>

Our Bodies, Ourselves
by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective
Published by Simon & Schuster, New York; 1992
pages 565 - 575

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